

LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

**SYRIA AND THE REGION:
The Changing Geopolitical Landscape and International
Relations in the Arab World**

By

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A thesis

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in International Affairs**

**School of Arts and Sciences
October 2014**



Lebanese American University

School of Arts and Sciences; Beirut Campus

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To my Mother, Father, Sister, and Grandmother

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the support of many people. First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude towards my advisor Dr. Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss, who graciously took her time to help me complete my thesis and guide me through this last step towards achieving my degree. I am also deeply thankful for Dr. Sami Baroudi and Dr. Makram Ouaiss, who also voluntarily took their time to serve on my thesis committee. I would also like to give a special thanks to my family, my friends, and my soon to be husband, for always offering support and love throughout the writing process. Last but not least, I would like to thank Dr. Bassel Salloukh who always encouraged me, and never gave up on my efforts to finish.

SYRIA AND THE REGION: The Changing Geopolitical Landscape and International Relations in the Arab World

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Abstract

Much of the media hype has portrayed the conflict in Syria as solely based on ideological and sectarian motivated calculations, specifically a Sunni-Shia conflict. The involvement of regional actors in Syria, mainly Saudi Arabia and Iran and their ensuing regional rivalry, have invited the sectarian divisions into the civil war as an extension of their interests. The confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has come to manifest itself inside Syria's civil war as a competition over the direction of the region's geopolitics and the future of the current regimes. The Arab states system's internal and external insecurities motivate alliances in the Middle East in accordance with the realist balance of power theory. By investigating the proxy war in Syria and involvement of Riyadh and Tehran in the region's neighboring states since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran and Saudi Arabia ultimately seek to protect their relative position in the region, secure their respective systems of government, and advance their influence in the Gulf and the broader Middle East.

Keywords: Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Balance of Power, Sectarianism, Geopolitics

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Glossary of Terms

FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Corporation Council
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
SNC	Syrian National Council
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	The United States

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

“You can’t make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can’t make peace without Syria.” – Henry Kissinger

The Middle East has witnessed major transformations of power since the Arab uprisings began in December of 2010. Political changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, brutal confrontations in Yemen and Bahrain, and less dramatic but not less than significant protests in Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco, have caused much regional uncertainty. In Syria, a civil war with sectarian fighting leaves the death toll rising each day. There are undeniable broader security and ideological pressures that have resonated, and almost every state in the Middle East is now familiar with some sort of domestic debilitation. Moreover, the uprisings have ushered in irreversible effects. Cross-border conflict, transnational radical groups, heightened sectarianism, and new regional rivalries are characterizing the Middle East.

Much of the media hype has portrayed the regionalization of the war in Syria as solely based on ideological and sectarian motivated calculations. This thesis intends to argue that the involvement of regional actors in the Syrian civil war is an extension of their domestic and geopolitical interests. The thesis aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has come to manifest itself inside Syria’s civil war. Realpolitik and authoritarian dynamics that define the Arab states system are based on external insecurities, which motivate

alliances in the Middle East for competition on geopolitical grounds. By investigating the proxy war in Syria and the region, the aim is to show how Iran and Saudi Arabia ultimately seek to protect their relative position in the region, secure their respective systems of government, and advance their influence in the Gulf and the broader Middle East.

Since 1979, Iran's Islamic Revolution caused a tense relationship with Saudi Arabia. The ideological differences between both states and their respective differences of interests in the Middle East, has facilitated an increasing regional rivalry between the two countries. In the Middle East, and particularly in the Persian Gulf, the rivalry aims to gain primacy in the region's affairs among the major regional and international states. This in the past has led to conflict such as the Iran-Iraq war, and the Arab Spring post-aftermath Syrian war. Iran's successful relationship with Hezbollah has enhanced Iran's regional status and influence, and the results of the Arab Spring made Saudi Arabia realize that its regional status was weakening, with the balancing of power tilted in Iran's favor (Adami & Poursesmaeili, 2013).

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq ruptured the regional order, and the Arab world, far from a seemingly unified entity. The 2011 Arab uprisings influenced the Middle East region on the levels of ideology, sect, and power politics (Dalacoura, 2013). Tracing the growth of regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the vacuum of power in the Middle East brought on by the Arab uprisings has left opportunities for the respective regimes to project political power and protect their interests. Syria is perceived as an opening for Iran to preserve its status quo and defend Iranian regional interests, or as an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to reverse the region's geopolitical realities and contain Iran's growing influence. The Arab uprisings have only

sectarianized the region's most sensitive fault lines between the pro-Western alliance, including Saudi-Arabia and the GCC, and the Iranian led resistance camps.

Investigating the Syrian civil war in the context of the changing geopolitical realities and international relations of Arab world is essential to understanding the future direction of Middle East politics and the best options for reform and post conflict stability. The Arab uprisings and the Syrian conflict were initially unleashed by domestic responses to inequalities, injustices, and oppression within individual Arab countries. However, their impact cannot be understood and their outcomes cannot be predicted in isolation of the larger regional picture and the policies and actions of major regional players as well as those of external powers (Ayoob, 95). The role of regional powers is important because they have to a large extent been driving events in Syria (Lassen, 2013). The sectarian diversion to the conflict is inflicted in great part as a tool of geopolitics, and sectarian animosity hides otherwise malleable pragmatic interests (Ma'oz, 2007). Iran and Saudi Arabia's competition in Syria has the potential to lead to an uneasy grand bargain or transform the region entirely, as Assad's Syria has become a focal point of the current Arab uprisings and a battlefield for maintaining or defining a new regional order.

1.2 Research Questions

What explains the regional struggle over Syria? Is it ideologically motivated or based on realist balance of power considerations? What are the regional implications of the struggle over Syria? Realist motivations and the intentions of Iran and Saudi Arabia set the context for the geopolitical implications of the region's involvement in Syria's war. The balance of power contest between Saudi-Arabia and Iran is based on a battle

over regional supremacy and maintaining regime survival (Salloukh, 2013). Ideological and sectarian narratives that have been injected into the geopolitical contest in the region are used as an instrument of Realpolitik to pursue realist ambitions, and have given Syria's civil war new dimensions and difficulties (Salloukh, 2013).

Saudi Arabia fears and seeks to balance Iranian influence by breaking down the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance. For Riyadh, if Syria were to realign with the non-resistance front, it could cause a major setback for Iran's regional ambitions, possibly creating a new Saudi-backed Islamist-dominated government in Syria (Heydemann, 2013), and change the current terms in the region's balance of power. For Iran, Iranian power is now deeply entrenched in the Levant, but distancing Syria away from Iran puts Tehran at risk of losing the fragile power they seek to maintain in the Gulf, Levant, and against the US and Israel. Furthermore, Iran's regional ambitions to counter the presence of the US and establish itself as a regional player with regards to its nuclear program will be drastically weakened without the resistance alliance.

The Arab uprisings and lack of Western interest opened up the opportunity for regional and extra regional powers to become increasingly active in the region (Lassen, 2013). The aim of the research questions are to show that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has interfered in Syria at a time when both their geopolitical interests are at risk. The assessment of the pragmatic interests in Syria would inevitably become a battlefield that would draw in external actors, including Iran, and would profoundly shape regional dynamics, and made involvement a geopolitical necessity for the Gulf (Hokayem, 2013). Moreover, internal political changes in the Syria will cause shifts in the balance of power across the region, which will affect, Turkey, Israel, and the West (Dalacoura,

2013), and possibly create new power structures and alliances whose consequences are still unclear.

1.3 Methodology

The Syrian civil war will be the single case-study for this analysis. This thesis will examine the manipulation of ideology through the use of sectarianism for Riyadh and Tehran's more realist and pragmatic regional ambitions. It also investigates the regional implications for the struggle over Syria and the reflection for influence on a global level. This thesis aims to explain Saudi Arabia and Iran's regional behavior using neo-realism, balance of power theories, regional alliances, and domestic variables, as an explanation for the regionalization of war in Syria. The limitations of this research may reflect the developing events and evolving information on Syria due to the civil war's ongoing circumstances, but based on the level of extreme involvement in the conflict and its heightened area of international interest, there is a need to produce new and current information.

Due to these limitations a qualitative approach will be used, and the data collected will consist of primary and secondary sources of the most recently published books, academic journals, academic blogs, professional newspapers and internet sources in English, French, and translated Arabic. As mentioned early on, the Arab uprisings are collectively worth analyzing to assess their impact as a regional issue contributing to the growing Saudi-Iranian rivalry, yet Syria is the only country currently in the ongoing phase of the uprisings, and not yet in the transitional or post-uprising phase. Likewise, as Syria's outcome is unknown, this study might lead to premature conclusions before Syria enters a transitional or post-conflict phase.

However, this case-study will show the cause of the level of violence in Syria has much more to do with regional competition than what is perceived, and the literature will determine the relationship of Syria to the ultimate priorities of the region. Academic sources will be used to examine the geopolitical battle over Syria between Saudi Arabia and Iran's regional rivalry, and rivalries and its outcome, will ultimately affect the region's alignment, influence, and perceived identity. This work can be applied not only to the unpredictable outcome of Syria, but for future analysis, obstacles, and arrangements, and the relationship between power and theory in Middle East international relations.

1.4 Map of Thesis

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter has provided a brief introduction to the Syrian conflict within the Arab uprisings, and introduced the thesis, by stating the research questions to be examined and the methodology to be used. The second chapter will be an expansion of the literature and present the theoretical background explaining realism's applicability to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the regionalization of the Syrian civil war. The regional confrontations through a realist explanation will focus on using the balance of power theory, and stating that ideological considerations are secondary, and that domestic instability further fuels the instrumental use of ideology, yet also overlaps with the realist considerations. Strategic interests still remain within a realist paradigm, and the geopolitical interests over Syria explain the escalation of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and their objectives to respectively maintain regional authority.

Chapter 3 will look at the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry in the region prior to the start of the Syrian civil war. This chapter will start with a discussion of the recent Iranian ascension in the region and the resistance alliance that was formed to ensure regime stability, and to maintain Iran's position in regional affairs. It will argue that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf's regional losses to Iran made counteracting Iranian influence a GCC priority. This will be discussed while emphasizing that the regional system is persistently prone to threats and insecurities which explain the sectarian tensions and motivate alliance behavior. It will also discuss the anxieties brought on by the Arab uprisings leading up to Syria, and how the movement facilitated the already existing geopolitical battles. Finally this chapter intends to tackle the initial reactions to the Syrian uprising, and how the traditionally powerful state is directly linked to the Iran-Saudi Arabia enduring struggle over regional supremacy and influence.

Chapter 4 will look at Iran and Saudi Arabia's current involvement inside the Syrian conflict. This chapter elaborates on the transformations of the Syrian conflict from an uprising to a civil war, and why regionalization of the conflict has played a role in the extreme violence. It will discuss Saudi Arabia's reactions to the opportunity of using regime change in Syria to alter the regional balance of power, and how ideological elements were invited into the conflict through the manipulation of the region's sensitive and existing sectarian divisions. It will also discuss Saudi Arabia's intentions to weaken Iran's strength in regional affairs, emphasizing that Syria unaligned with Iran, gives Riyadh the opportunity to redirect the balance of regional power in favor of the kingdom's authority. On the other hand, Iran intends to prevent any regime change in Syria not in accordance with Iranian approval in order to defend its regional and

international interests. This chapter intends to argue that regionalization of the Syrian conflict is due to Tehran and Riyadh's contest shifting from uneasy to well-fledged animosity, and has caused the fracturing and disintegration of Syria and its surroundings.

Finally, the conclusion will discuss the thesis and its findings, and provide a current situation on the impact of the Syrian uprising on Middle East and international affairs. It will address the future outcome of Syria, discuss the possible scenarios, and will also briefly address the significance of Syria on an international level, mainly for future the policy-making in the US. It will also briefly describe how this process has invited Islamist and fundamentalist groups into the Syrian conflict, and the drive behind the continuation of hostilities.

1.5 Levels of Analysis

Sectarianism is not solely stimulated by foreign actors, and is found on the societal level. Uprisings and revolutions often manipulate and exploit identities in society, and citizens cling to identities for security during times of turmoil. Despite the overall realist framework used in this thesis and the analysis of this case study at the macro level one should acknowledge the influence but not determining role of the individual level of analysis on the Syrian conflict. Micro- levels of analysis present several theoretical and methodological implications for the case study. The literature on the topic is limited, but the link between diaspora and host communities can provide some insight on the exploitation of sectarianism. As of 2014, religious fundamentalism is a grave concern, and a major contribution to the lack of peace in the region. States that cannot provide basic needs, or states that create exclusionary policies at home or

abroad, lead individuals to feel segregated or isolated from society. Recruits mobilize in response to a perceived threat and opportune incentives, and fundamentalist groups routinely emerge due to a void between the state and individuals.¹

There is often a relationship between leaders and oppositionists in surrounding states. Sectarianism can be mobilized and exploited by these actors, but it is also susceptible to external ideologies and regional shocks (Wehrey, 2014). The role of the authoritarian state has attempted to control uprisings in one area from echoing in another. The Syrian Civil war has been the most recent event in the Middle East to stir sectarian sentiments, but the roots of sectarian tensions in the region are within domestic contexts and regimes often face clashes in the region as a result of their own failed sectarian strategies. It is important to recognize the ideological roots and the domestic contexts of fundamentalist movements in the region, but wars, revolutions, and external meddling, exacerbate these existing regional tensions (Wehrey, 2014). A question for further scholarship might be to what extent sectarian identities have been meaningful, linked, and exploited at micro levels of analysis.

Ideological sentiments are stronger during times of upheaval and distress, and particularly resonate among those who feel denied to political and economic resources (Wehrey, 2014). Stirring sectarian sentiments can provide benefits to groups at the societal level, such as access to political power. These groups can foster regime security, allowing national governments to justify sectarian rhetoric and divisions, as a supportive factor of national and geo-strategic interests (Moore & Tumelty, 2007). Moreover, sectarian divisions in the region cannot easily define transnational movements in the

¹ Frederic M. Wehrey discusses this in *Sectarian politics in the Gulf: from the Iraq war to the Arab uprisings* both in the Introduction and the Roots of Sectarianism.

Middle East, which have included ethnic and tribal identities, and ideologies such as Nasserism, Baathism, and communism. The Middle East Gulf countries traditionally share similar the perceptions of threat and security, where regional and national security often overlaps with regime security.

Focusing on interplay between domestic and regional considerations best helps to clarify and comprehend current events. Framing the Syrian conflict as nonsectarian was undone by domestic and regional factors. Ideological divisions in societies allowed campaigns from regimes to portray the uprisings in the region as sectarian inspired. Domestic power rivalries and the fractured nature of Gulf politics facilitated the emergence of sectarian rivalries. The result is damaged security and stability in domestic and regional environments. New and emerging dimensions to the Syrian conflict are the price of highlighting sectarian differences, which has become another useful tool in the balancing strategy of the Saudi-Iran rivalry. The following chapter will elaborate on the realist explanation using the balance of power theory, and the ideological and domestic considerations that overlap.

Chapter Two

Theory

2.1 Introduction

The Middle East state system was created in and continues to exist among undeniably high levels of conflict. Ideological and identity conflicts, transnational movements, and proxy wars, fuel the region with insecurity, and the fear of power is paramount in comparison to other parts of the world. These insecurities along, with weak economic and political institutions, strengthened the structure and advancement of the authoritarian state system. This system was created based on the fear of the permeability between state borders, and the contagion of political issues that are interconnected between state and society in the region, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, reinforced it. Moreover, outside interference and external support for regimes in the Middle East threaten domestic environments and prompt questions about state sovereignty, and weak states become more frequent targets of external efforts to alter domestic institutions (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2013).

Outside intervention by regional powers rooted in a competition for regional authority have complicated the Syrian crisis and continually increase insecurity in the region (Goldstone, 2011). The above has set a tone for conflict, as Saudi Arabia and Iran maneuver to gain regional advantages at the expense of one another, to gain power for themselves and often to the disadvantage of weaker states (Downs, 2013). Saudi Arabia and Iran's regional rivalry currently manifests itself in the internal conflicts of its neighbors, in which Riyadh and Tehran seek to influence the region's surrounding

domestic environments. Their sectarian competition has previously fueled proxy conflict in, but not limited to, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, and now Syria. In Syria, both Saudi Arabia and Iran view the other's regional position and power as competition and a legitimate threat to their positions for regional security.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the rivalry through a greater theoretical framework, using a neo-realist approach along with ideological and domestic variables. This chapter will show that balance of power and alliance formation are used as strategies to reinforce state survival in the Persian Gulf, and motivates Riyadh's and Tehran's involvement in the Middle East affairs. State survival is an ultimate priority, because the elements of regional homogeneity that exist are overtaken by power struggles between state systems competing for maximum security and power as an important regional currency (Fawcett, 2013).

There has been a recent expansion of highly integrated theoretical frameworks to explain developments, determinants, and political outcomes throughout the Arab uprisings. As Stephen Walt argues, the boundaries of each paradigm are somewhat permeable, and there is ample opportunity for intellectual arbitrage (Walt, 1998). Revolutionary theories are often important topics to the field of modern political science, where often Marxist theories and the divisions of class-based inequalities are used to explain the transformations of societies and discriminations into severe conflict (Niakooee, 2013). In the case of the Syrian 'revolution', a combination of factors including the mobilization of the opposition, the role of the military, and the involvement of outside powers, has transformed the makings of an uprising into a civil war. Historical evidence on revolutions further shows that a demand for political change

and uprisings are generally responded by regime suppression or change, or creates a prolonged civil war as a result of the factors aforementioned (Niakooee, 2013).

It is the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East that creates the regional security dilemma and the important regional power structures that make neo-realism's balancing theories highly applicable to analyzing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Syria and other states. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the main concepts of realism in regards to the region, state that ideological considerations are secondary to realist interests, and that domestic instability further fuels the instrumental use of ideology, but also overlaps with realist considerations. Elucidating on the formation of Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry will focus primarily on concepts of power and interests within a realist paradigm combined with the former for a strengthened analysis, and emphasize that overall objectives are meant to secure a corresponding position of a regional headship. This has led to escalation over the conflict in Syria, and validates an appropriate case study of Iran and Saudi Arabia's regional and domestic intentions.

2.2 Realism and Geopolitics

Middle East realist theory describes alliance making and balance of power formations as the primary management system to address security and threats in the region. States will act to protect their territory and resources, because the international system functions in an anarchic environment where conflict is and always will be inevitable due a lack of effective international governing authority. The structure of the international system creates an environment where states are motivated to secure or consolidate their position and power, mostly by balancing against the power and threats of other states (Waltz, 1979). States then affect international behavior because they aim

to maximize and hold the majority of power. Domestic politics are within the states control, but international politics are more so imposed by the structure of the international system (Waltz, 1979). Accumulating power for state interests will inevitably increase the insecurities of others, which will exacerbate the security dilemma, and naturally motivates other states to increase their strength and power.

The balance of power is recognized as the most important technique for managing insecurity in realism (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2013). The best way to ensure continued survival is to be the most powerful state within the international system, and the stronger a state is seen to be by its potential rivals, the less likely it is that any of those rivals will attack it or threaten its survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). Accumulating power has more often pushed states to use balancing techniques, including alliance formation with other states, to manage insecurity and keep the international system to the best of its stability. Kenneth Waltz argues that because states are units more often distinguished by their capability, the dynamics of the international system can change based upon the great powers within the system, which can alter state capabilities and behavior (Downs, 2013). States are then motivated to compete for overall security, and decision-making is for individual and national self-interest, while identity is secondary and only used to protect domestic authority (Fawcett, 2013).

It is important to recognize that the dynamics of the Middle East region are somewhat based on how a state is perceived, and this reflects on state behavior within the states system. States should seek to maximize their capabilities to balance that of their adversaries, as Stephen Walt notes that historically regional alliances are a balancing strategy used in the Middle East, and regional states are perceived to present more imminent security threats (Walt, 1987). States tend to align with or against the

foreign power that poses the greatest threat, thus the perception of threat sometimes matters more than their capabilities (Walt, 1987). Elements of identity politics can play a role in threat perception, as states must adjust and form policy based on what they assume they know, but balancing in the face of threat, and whether ideology or policy instruments can sway alignment choices, are included as important aspects of formulating state security. On the whole, the fundamental driver of the region's relationships is to shape the regional balance of power (Mabon, 2013).

The Syrian conflict propagates regional concern which affects state motivations and actions, and contributes to the sensitive domestic and regional environments that influence the justification of state behavior and involvement in the struggle (Downs, 2013). Examining alliance choices in the region demonstrate that regional wars in the Middle East are often set in the context of other wars, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iran-Iraq war, and arguably the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and tend to obey the rules of balance of power politics and reveal the insecurities of the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East (Fawcett, 2013). As threats to Assad's Syria over security increases, alliances will assumingly further consolidate. Based on its own regional history of alliances choices, Syria tends reinforce its relationships with close allies, such as Iran and Hezbollah, which has been made apparent by President Bashar al-Assad's response to the ongoing threats to his regime (Wallsh, 2013).

The structure of the Middle East regional system, with arguably two remaining strong states post Iraq 2003 and post Arab uprisings ignites an interstate rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The perception of the current Iranian threat in the region, allows for a more nuanced approach to examine regional geopolitics. Why Iran and Saudi Arabia view each other as threatening mostly has to do with the perception of intentions

and military power (Gause III, 2009). Although Saudi Arabia's alliance choices are dictated by the ideological threat posed by the Iranian Islamic Revolution as much as balance of power concerns, threats in the region are seen as both military and political (Gause III, 2013, p.274). The Iran-Hezbollah alliance without Syria would cause major setbacks for Iran's regional ambitions, formed to balance American and Israeli influence in the region, and to serve as an alternative model of government to the Arab-Sunni monarchies. Ultimately, if Saudi Arabia can deter Syria away from Iran's influence, it would limit its political power in the region, along with Hamas and Hezbollah, and its material capabilities along the Israeli border (Salloukh, 2010), allowing the kingdom to have the upper hand in regional diplomacy and power.

2.3 Situating the Rivalry

The beginnings of the Arab Spring magnified the region's geopolitical battles, and ramifications of regional insecurity were catastrophic to Syria. As the late Patrick Seale once wrote, whoever desires to dominate the Middle East must control the state of Syria (Seale, 1986). The recent uprisings have reignited old regional conflicts, and facilitated the Gulf's geopolitical battles, with Syria being the focal point of regional competition (Heydemann, 2013). Regional insecurities fuel the current Saudi Arabia-Iran regional rivalry, as their state sovereignty is challenged both territorially and ideologically. Iran and Saudi Arabia's confrontation in Syria has revealed the instability of the regional system, as each respectively aims to protect its geopolitical interests, maintain their perceived regional power, and expand regional and international influence. Not only do Saudi Arabia and Iran view their position in Syria as a need to maintain regional headship, but also as protection for their domestic survival. As a

result, the double edged security dilemma has legitimately created an ideological and geopolitical competition between Riyadh and Tehran.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict are a part of a competition over pre-determined geopolitical interests for influence, more so than an evident ideological struggle. Tehran and Riyadh are in competition for political influence in regional affairs and seek to assert a primary role in international affairs such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. This factor compounds older sources of instability arising from the Palestinian issue and the implosion of Iraq as a state following the US invasion of 2003 (Muralidhara, 2013). Although, their position of regional influence is apparent in their rivalry, to comprehend the full dynamic of their rivalry it is necessary to understand the impact of their internal dynamics and how this factors into external relations in the Middle East. The remainder of the thesis elaborate on the development process of securing regime and regional stability, and how rivalry has destabilized domestic environments of neighboring Arab states.

The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance seemed to be the strongest alliance in the region, which is an image Iran tried to cultivate when the Arab uprisings erupted (Khoury, 2013). Iran's position in the region is of geopolitical importance itself, and Syria has become vital to Iranian overall state security. Due to Syria's role in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance, the outcome of the Syrian uprising is of geostrategic importance to Tehran. Iran's security dilemma has created a balancing strategy in the region to maintain its regional security as a non-Arab state in the Middle East. Its position of primacy within the region, in spite of the Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shia divide, attempts to protect the identity of the revolution and the use Iran's Islamic ideology to facilitate the achievement of the previous two goals (Parsi, 2007).

Saudi Arabia's ambition to be a regional power is conducted by strengthening the other Sunni monarchies in the region, using wealth to push its influence, and maintaining alliances to strengthen those states revolving in its ideological orbit, including the GCC countries. The concept of the 'status quo' becomes pertinent in volatile regions, and Middle East is unique in that the livelihood of several monarchical governments relies on interdependence and careful policymaking to prevent a revolutionary wave (Downs, 2013). In addition, the policies and involvement of the Arab-Gulf States are routinely prioritized based on regime survival and a geopolitical battle for regional hegemony (Gause III, 2011). The post Arab uprisings environment and the Syrian conflict have given Saudi Arabia an opportunity to try to consolidate and expand its regional influence, as it views Iran's expanding influence as a threat to its own regional security.

While Iran's position in the region is viewed as threatening to Saudi Arabia, Iranian primacy and power increases the strength of its allies and the resistance axis in the region. Specifically, Iran's alliance with Bashar al-Assad's Syria bridges its vital connection to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, share a common perception of threats in regards to the region, including the interference of the US in regional, economic, and political affairs, and the ongoing Arab-Israeli peace process. Early on, Iran understood the geopolitical advantages of maintaining a relationship with Hezbollah and the Shia of south Lebanon. Most importantly, Lebanon's proximity to Israel enhances its strategic depth against its Israeli nemesis, and allows the Islamic Republic to maintain critical aspects of the Iranian revolution, particularly continued support for the Palestinian struggle. The success of the Iranian strategy, with its

connection to Hezbollah, challenged Saudi Arabia's legitimacy both regionally and domestically (Mabon, 2013).

2.4 Competing Theories

Since states are sovereign entities, motivated by self-interest and survival, long-term mutually beneficial cooperation is difficult to maintain. Based on the scope of this thesis, it is difficult to provide each competing theory with a justifiable and lengthy explanation, but the applicability of liberal theories to the Middle East are limited. Identity and interests must coincide before more liberal theories can be used to explain the region. Rivalries, regimes insecurities, and external intervention are all hindrances to cooperation in the Middle East, and persistent rivalries continue to harm the region's potential for cooperation. Instability in the Middle East demonstrates that the region has no real security community, and no established shared standards. Furthermore, Middle East regional cooperation studies in security and conflict are almost non-existent. At best, conducting a regional order is important for the Middle East because it guides and frames debates over domestic politics and society about people and governments in the region (Fawcett, 2013).

The current regional alliances are most often viewed as power politics or in sectarian terms: as proxy battles between Saudi and Iranian led blocs in the regional balance of power and as struggles between Sunni and Shia alliances in the greater Middle East region (Ryan, 2012). In the attempt to describe state behavior in the Middle East, the local and specialized circumstances of the region cannot be ignored. With the exception of Israel and its isolation in the region, there is undeniably some sort of shared linguistic and religious, shared norms, values, identities, and ideas that exist and

influence the Middle East. Realist theories tend to view the Middle East states in a more authoritarian and generalized manner, often ignoring the distinct formation of identity in the Arab state systems. Arguing that state identities will shape their interests, and inter-Arab politics can be viewed as a competition over sovereignty and ideology in regards to the norms and constraints that should shape societies, although many identities and linkages bind the Middle East together, and these will affect regional outcomes and choices (Fawcett, 2013).

Alexander Wendt argues, because of the former, neorealism cannot adequately explain structural changes in the international system (Wendt, 1999). The international system is structured to influence state behavior, but not predict it, and instead the system is influenced by a construction of ideas. However, the elements of identity politics in the Middle East should not be overstated. Identities and ideologies are often used as an instrument to bridge social grievances and disorder as causes and consequences of periods of instability, such as upheavals and revolutions (Groth, 1996). Exporting a particular ideology relies on mobilizing identity, but it is effective only when combined with money and arms (Barnett, 1993). The long term outcome of ideological or sectarian driven policies depends on the equivalence to the material balance of power, and moreover, available relative power can also force alterations in identity.

The result is that the region's political conflicts grew naturally in correlation with opposing ideologies, but sectarianism was not always the driving force of these contests (Kerr, 1971). Many scholars contribute the Iranian-Syrian alliance to a common Shia identity, but a more convincing analysis is from shared strategic interests, especially when it comes to common adversaries such as Israel, and how their security cooperation deepened in response to a common threat (Wallsh, 2013). Although Syria is considered

a secular state, the often identified Alawite offshoot of Shi'ism may have cemented the alliance between Iran and Syria, but it was ultimately a strategic push for both Syria and Iran to have a politically based alliance (Milani, 2013). If the argument for an Iran-Syria-Hezbollah relationship was created and sustained only by an assuming Shia Crescent, then sectarianism cannot fully explain why Syria managed to become a part of the equation (Ma'oz, 2007).

Saudi Arabia currently has great suspicion of Iranian involvement in Shia dominated affairs, but the Shia-Sunni division is a non-security aspect of the rivalry, it is but an ideological matter with security related consequences (Downs, 2013). It is worth mentioning that before the Arab Spring created its pathway into Syria, there was some rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Damascus knew that Riyadh was not initially eager for a Arab Spring related revolution in Syria, and Riyadh was grateful for how Damascus handled the cover of Saudi Arabia's violent intervention with the unrest in Bahrain in early 2011 (Salem, 2011). As Syria attempted to balance against regional uncertainty, it softly balanced against Iran's growing influence (Wallsh, 2013). The former example shows that alliances are not particularly sectarian based, and they have even in recent past transcended sectarian differences.

Security studies in the literature show the two main areas over which Riyadh and Tehran currently compete, ideologically and geopolitically, can feed into each other. Islam as an important representative of both Saudi Arabia and Iran creates an ideological competition between them, and a response from one state logically necessitates a response from the other. Each competes for ideological sovereignty to have some sort of religious dominance and legitimacy over the region, but their sectarian differences mask a strong nationalistic stance. Advocating sectarian differences ultimately serves as a

legitimization tool for both Riyadh and Tehran (Mabon, 2013). The tensions do not originate from a Sunni-Shia dispute; instead they more convincingly originate from export strategies and competition in the region. Saudi Arabia is both a Gulf neighbor and an Islamic state, and competition with Iran stems from the importance of Islam but it is in the end nationalistic (Mabon, 2013).

Theory then must be adapted to facilitate realist explanations, to recognize that identity and ideological variables do matter, but as a means of influencing perceptions and thus state behavior, rather than displacing states and state power (Fawcett, 2013). Sectarian differences shape regional relations but it does not overtake the role of the state. When identity or ideology becomes an instrument of state power, like the use of sectarianism, it might dictate what the state wants to do, but not what it can actually accomplish. Saudi Arabia by example made a conscious decision to strengthen the presence of sectarian identities and divisions as “a part of their strategy to increase support for their allies, and to isolate Iran and its allies in the Arab world” (Gause III, 2011, p.21).

If national interests transcend sectarian motivations as seen in alliances, then it is reasonable to assume that sectarian elements of conflict reflect larger political goals. Much of the sectarian rhetoric in Syria has been used on all sides to gain support and ultimately cause disconnect from the reality of the conflict (Qaddour, 2013). There was perhaps no inherent element of sectarianism in the Arab uprisings that began early in 2011, but the visible opportunity to undermine Iran’s regional allies, and create divisions to divert attention away from the weaknesses inherent in the institutions of Arab Gulf states, brought sectarianism to the foreground. Although ideology does have an impact on alliance choices, it is more often that states lacking domestic legitimacy are more

likely to seek ideological alliances to increase internal and external support (Walt, 1987).

The Arab uprisings demonstrated that domestic variables have incredible relevance to foreign policy. This helps to illustrate that state insecurity domestically, interplaying with the region's security constraints, are imposed by the complications of the international system. When conflict occurs between states in the Middle East, there is an internal-external security dynamic (Hinnebusch, 2003). This fuels domestic and regional security policy, where the efforts that states make to maintain internal stability has increased policy action on regional and external security measures (Mabon, 2013). This is exemplified by Saudi Arabia and Iran's initial responses at the beginning of the Arab Spring, which will be elaborated on in the following chapter, later became contradictory positions in the Syrian conflict. The Gulf States are in a competition for power and influence in the region, but they also have concerns over domestic instability and identities that exacerbate this security threat (Gause III, 2009). Therefore, it is limiting to simply state that a balance of power calculation, to drive ones power internationally and in the region, is used as a cause of war and alliance in the Gulf (Gause III, 2009).

The support that has been offered from Saudi Arabia to overthrow the Bashar Al-Assad's regime, demonstrates a clear contradiction in Riyadh's policy of preserving the status-quo, which shifted throughout the beginnings of the uprisings. The same can be said for Tehran's support for Assad, and its hypocritical shift related to Iran's supportive behavior during aftermath of the Arab Spring. While championing the changes in leadership of the Arab Spring early on, Iran's position has changed in regards to Syria (Mabon, 2013). Given Tehran's ties to the Assad regime, Iran's behavior supports the

notion that geopolitical considerations outweigh ideological considerations (Mabon, 2013). Moreover, consolidating regime security in the region to stay in power is as concerning as traditional state security, although traditional state security concerns must be present (Gause III, 2009). Riyadh and Tehran must overall carefully consider what it takes to promote values, as too much direct aggression could be harmful to their most important national interests.

Iran and Saudi Arabia's interference in regional conflict relies on their relationships to foster external and internal security for their respective regimes. The weak states of the Middle East states system face competition from internal and transnational popular movements, as they are easily prone to exploitation through regional permeability. There is a regional security aspect that Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries operate under, to protect their Sunni-led monarchical states from the unconsolidated regional system (Hinnebusch, 2003). A strategy of regional competition and supporting outside groups to manage ideological threats, offers support to deflect attention away from internal problems. This serves a dual benefit, for domestic security and geopolitical security as it counters advances made by the rival states. The result is that rivalry in the Gulf views Syria's position in the region as a link to the complexity of their domestic, regional, and international interests.

2.5 Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's leadership focuses on balancing Iran's regional influence and enhancing the kingdom's regional position. Saudi Arabia's regional status and a need to protect the monarchies in the region base Riyadh's focus on Syria as final resort to protect the kingdom's security and survival. Moreover, the perceived threat from Iran's

revolutionary government and controversial nuclear program², motivates Saudi Arabia and the GCC to work together to balance against Iranian influence. Riyadh is convinced that reversing Tehran's influence in the Middle East is a prerequisite to insulating the kingdom from the threat of Iran. The support of Iran has been vital the Assad regime's survival strategy, and resisting Syria's breakdown or entry into meaningful negotiations demonstrates Iran prioritizing their primarily geopolitical interests. Surrounded by enemies, recent past has made for Iran's pragmatic policy, and defending Iranian interests in Syria is now at a turning point for its regional ascension.

In general, the scope of the literature on the security relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is limited. Examining the available resources, a neo-realist approach works best to analyze outside involvement in Syria's war, while using elements of ideological and domestic variables, the Syrian conflict is an example product of the current bi-polar dynamic of the regional system (Downs, 2013). Realist theories point out that external involvement in Syria was initially managed in a way not to appear directly aggressive, as this would damage maximizing interests and influence. States that are viewed as too aggressive are likely to promote others to balance against them, and their perceived intentions are crucial to how others react (Walt, 1987). An ensuing sectarian crisis distracted from the real conflict, but attempts to alter the balance of power and aspirations to gain the regional upper hand, has allowed Syria to become the greatest proxy conflict in recent history of regional competition.

The policies of the Gulf are routinely prioritized based on regime survival and a geopolitical battle for regional hegemony. National values or identity, and national

² See updated information on the Iranian nuclear controversy at http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iran/nuclear_program/index.html

interests or intentions, are distinguishable but not mutually exclusive. As a result, there can come a point where national values could compromise interests, because state values are what define them, and going too far would harm national interests (Downs, 2013). The outlook of the resistance alliance prevailing in Syria weakens the appearance of the monarchical governments in the Gulf and the Middle East. On the other hand, a resistance without Syria weakens the Iran's maneuvering in the region, and prospectively tilts the balance of power out of Iranian favor. The literature demonstrates that the Gulf countries are specifically interested in pursuing their own interests in regional politics, and are not concerned with rebuilding a new, free, and democratic Syria (Qaddour, 2013).

The Arab uprisings caused an expansion of the insecurity in the region, but the developments in Syria have been met with conflicting interests, and foreign powers have not yet been able to play a determining role (Niakooee, 2013). Sectarian rhetoric in the Syrian conflict was stirred with the help of regional interference, to create tension between opposing factions. Iran's regional ambitions were not originally expressed or implemented in a sectarian fashion, but Iran attempting to establish its regional presence, and defend its position in Syria, profits from sectarian language and religious-political movements within their line of thinking (Matthiesen, 2013). Iran's motivation is driven by geo-strategic interests before faith, and Iranian regional policy aims to advance Iranian national interest as much as to promote any sectarian Shia agenda (Ma'oz, 2007, p.2).

The recurring process of establishing a new and stable balance in the region brings to the surface and intensifies regional rivalries (Parsi, 2007). Saudi Arabia and Iran's contest in the regional balance of power has solidified a violent form of

sectarianism as an inseparable mechanism to penetrate and influence Syria. Foreign intervention has regionalized the Syrian conflict, where a decisive role in the continuation of the war will weigh heavily on the outlook of regional power interests. This chapter has hoped to demonstrate that the Riyadh and Tehran's rivalry in Syria is about survival and shaping the future geopolitical landscape in the region. It has argued that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry exists within two spheres, ideological and geopolitical, and domestic variables also affect external relationships, but the ultimate decision-making is calculated to maintain regional and state security. Using Sunni-Shia tensions as an explanation for regional politics and conflict in Syria is simplifying and misleading. If violence follows sectarianism, it cannot explain why fighting is less intense in other cases or in other states in the region, but has intensified in Syria. Sectarianism may be used as a means to an end for Syria in particular, but it cannot provide the best explanation for regional or state motivated policy.

Chapter Three

The Regional Game

3.1 Introduction

After the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, the changes to the Middle East were rapid and underestimated. The new direct American presence in the region overthrew the Iraqi Baathist regime, and immediately affected the regional balance of power. This event effectively positioned Saudi Arabia and Iran to be major regional players in Middle East geopolitics. In comparison to the other Middle Eastern states, Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to remain distinct rivals in direct competition over regional affairs. Antagonism between Tehran and Riyadh runs deep, as each state considers itself to be the natural leader of the broader Middle East, and mitigating sectarian conflict has become an operational tool in validating their respective regimes.

Competing interests between Riyadh and Tehran since the advent of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq has fundamentally affected regional dynamics. Spreading instability by interfering in the domestic environments of other regional states became a mechanism for projecting power indirectly. The dangerousness in their respective gaming strategies, often have lined up along sectarian divisions. The ‘regional game’ that has been played out since 2003 provides a backdrop for the Arab uprisings and the Syrian conflict. This chapter will focus on the regional confrontations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, leading up to the start of the Arab uprisings. The argument is that the developments in Iraq and the Levant led to a popular view of Iranian ascension in the region with the formation of a ‘resistance

alliance'. As a result of the former, Saudi Arabia's regional losses to Iran made counteracting Iranian influence a regional priority. In particular, the political and sectarian vulnerabilities in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territories presented an inviting opportunity for a grand contest between the rivals. The chapter concludes with a brief background to the Arab uprisings and how the rivals reacted before the conflict began inside Syria.

The Cold War provided historical contexts for proxy wars between regional states as, "international conflicts between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country...as a means for achieving preponderant foreign goals and foreign strategies (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984, p. 263-264)." The third country's surroundings are normally prone to external meddling as a result of weak and faltering political structures. The three major areas for meddling in the region prior to Syria were seen in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territories, but all three were unsuccessful for Riyadh (Gause III, 2011). The successful expansion of Tehran's influence of from 2003 to the beginnings of the Arab uprisings was viewed as a major loss for Riyadh. The present urgency for Saudi Arabia to balance against Iran's growing influence has led to regional turmoil.

Iran's focus has been concentrated on developing relationships with non-state actors, such as pro-Iranian religious groups in Iraq³, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza, as means by which Iran could project decisive Iranian influence in the Middle East to counter its perceived isolation. Strengthening Iranian influence in Iraq and the Levant was meant to counteract the pro-Western bloc of influence led by the US, and

³ Pro-Iranian groups in Iraq are arguably associated with being funded and trained by the Iranian al-Quds force, part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

help to justify the Iranian regime as a well-established regional player in Middle East affairs. Saudi Arabia's counter strategy has relied on the use of its enormous oil wealth to buy influence, and before the Syrian war, it had avoided any direct confrontation with the Iranians. Although Syria was not the first occasion where disputes between Saudi Arabia and Iran ensued, the magnitude of the Syrian conflict to date is unmatched. Since Iraq in 2003, Tehran has used regional instability as an opportunity to deepen its existing regional alliances and tilt the balance of power in its favor. Riyadh perceives its regional losses to Iran as detrimental to its regional and domestic security, and the Saudi leadership in many cases has chosen to respond by using strategies rooted in sectarian thinking. The rivalry over power between the two states directly linked Syria to the ongoing regional game in the Gulf, a battle for geopolitical and domestic security.

3.2 Non-State Actors in the Levant

3.2.1 Hezbollah in Lebanon

Iran's successful relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah, has led Saudi Arabia to perceive Iran's presence in the Levant as a serious threat to its security. Iran considers itself, a traditional Persian state, to be surrounded by animosity from surrounding Arab states. Historically suffering from isolation due to a lack of any 'natural' allies, based on its size, philosophy, and geographic location, Iran developed a strategy in Lebanon to maintain regional influence and supervision in Israeli-Palestinian affairs. To successfully export and implement the ideals of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, Tehran was well aware how crucial it was to develop relationships and strengthen ties with outside actors. Although Islam and Shi'ism are ideologically embedded in the identity of the Iranian

state, Iran emphasized that its goals served to export the ideals of the Islamic republic, and to resist rapprochement with the West and Israel (Rakel, 2007). This and support for the Palestinian resistance movement against the state of Israel, made up the pillars of the Iranian Islamic revolution. The geopolitical importance of building relationships to secure allies for the new Iranian revolutionary regime was to promote Iran's ideals and serve as an alternative model to the influence of the US and its allies.

The importance of Lebanon to Iran was not just found in religion and ideology, but it was found in geopolitical factors, as Lebanon offered Iran the opportunity to jump over Iraq and reach a wider constituency within the Arab world (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002). As a result, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp helped create Hezbollah, by exporting its revolutionary influence in Lebanon after Israel's invasion in 1982. Iran's delicate balance of interests across ideological lines successfully provided indirect support to allies in Lebanon (Norton, 2007). By 1985, radical dreams for transforming Lebanon into an offspring of Iran's Islamic Republic took its first steps towards becoming a reality.

Iran was focused on creating alliances that could contain the presence of the Western influences, as Tehran saw this to be its greatest obstacle to its influence regional affairs. Lebanon's proximity to Israel and the Palestinians, gave Iran an appropriate reason to create a resistance militia in south Lebanon that would uphold and defend the ideals of the Iranian revolution. This was a part of a strategy that would allow Iran to act as a conductor in Lebanon without having to involve itself in any direct confrontation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians in fact, became essential to justifying the Iranian presence in Lebanon, although the resistance towards Israel was traditionally regarded as a part of Arab regional affairs.

Since 1979, Syria has been Iran's only consistent ally, and Iran's relationship with Syria grew over a mutual conjoined balancing effort to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and a shared dislike for the US and Israel (Wehrey & Sadjadpour, 2014). Syria's interests in Lebanon has further complicated Lebanon's domestic environment. Damascus contributed to influencing the 1989 Taif agreement that helped to end the Lebanese Civil War⁴, and throughout the 1990's began to take on a substantial facilitating role to the continued success of Hezbollah-Iranian relations (Samii, 2008). Syria was geographically able to facilitate Iran's support of Lebanon, and simultaneously Hezbollah developed strong ties to Syria as an overseer of key interests in Lebanese affairs and its own struggles against Israel. Damascus viewed a relationship with both Hezbollah and Iran as providing security that was convenient, strategic, and necessary for Syria to have influence in Arab-Israeli affairs. However, Saudi Arabia did not appreciate Syria's facilitation of Iranian policies, as this allowed greater Iranian access to Lebanon via its proximity to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. In large part Riyadh's strategy for managing the Iranian presence in the Levant has been to isolate and weaken Syria since 2005 (Wehrey et al., 2009).

Hezbollah's first notable success came in 2000, when the resistance militia on the Lebanese border, facilitated the forceful withdraw of Israeli troops from the Lebanese border where they had been stationed for more than a decade (Salem, 2008). This accomplishment immediately catapulted Hezbollah from an organized militia to a prominent non-state actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although Hezbollah maintained that their resistance movement existed as a force set against the state of Israel and its

⁴ The Lebanese Civil war was a bloody and multifaceted war between opposing groups in Lebanon that lasted from 1975-1990.

occupation of Palestine, Riyadh instead opted to finance Salafi groups and competing Lebanese factions in opposition to Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia chose not to openly support Hezbollah as it was seen by Riyadh as a deliberate extension of Iran, and denounced the efforts of Hezbollah as an extension of Iran's policy of solidifying ties among various Shia groups in the region. It was Saudi Arabia's relationship with late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri funneled Saudi influence back into Lebanon's arena. Hariri became closely associated with Riyadh and later served as Lebanon's Prime Minister for the first time in 1992.

Hariri is often credited with reconstructing much of Lebanon after the destruction of its fifteen year civil war along with the Taif agreement that helped to end the war, which was assisted by mediation from Saudi Arabia (Salem, 2008). Devastatingly, years later on February 14, 2004, Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Beirut. There was immediate speculation that those responsible for the crime included Hezbollah and Syria. The aftermath over Hariri's assassination triggered sectarian tensions within Lebanon. The mass demonstrations and pressure from the international community led to the Cedar Revolution in 2005 that forced the Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon. In response to the Cedar Revolution, the domestic environment in Lebanon quickly became divided into two distinct political camps. The split between Lebanese political factions quickly sharpened Sunni and Shia divisions in Lebanon. Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies became known as the March 8th⁵ camp and included Syria and Iran,

⁵ The March 8th faction is an alliance among political groups in Lebanon, established in 2005, and is often considered as pro-Syrian within the Lebanese government.

while the Hariri movement and its Lebanese allies became known as March 14th⁶, composed of, the US, France, and Saudi Arabia (Salloukh, 2013).

During the dark summer of 2006, Hezbollah moved from the Lebanese realm and became a regional, if not international sensation. During the 33 day Hezbollah-Israel war, Hezbollah was successfully able to inflict heavy damages on Israel in a war that was designed to destroy it altogether (Salem, 2008). The results of the war were unexpected, and Hezbollah's popularity increased immediately while Iran reaped the benefits of its military successes as well. Hezbollah's deterrent power proved that Iran was to be a regional contender on a broader scale. This turn of events pointed to signs of Iran's ascension in the region, as Tehran showed it could reach a broader Arab population and become a key player in Arab-Israeli affairs over the West and Saudi Arabia (Samii, 2008).

The aftermath of the 2006 war also saw Hezbollah emerge as the most controversial yet increasingly powerful force in Lebanese politics. In 2008, the March 14th-led government crackdown on Hezbollah's private communications network led to Hezbollah's takeover of Beirut, and in 2011, Hezbollah's March 8th grouping successfully ousted Hariri's March 14th government (Salloukh, 2013). Hezbollah's impact on the Lebanese government served as another indicator of the successes of Iran's influence in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia's misfortune was that it had no similar military achievement on which to base its reputation. Although Riyadh allegedly has tried to bolster its own power in the country by arming Sunni militias in northern

⁶ The March 14th faction was named after the occurrence of the Cedar Revolution in 2005, is an alliance among political groups in Lebanon, and often considered as anti-Syrian within the Lebanese government.

Lebanon, it has thus far remained a much weaker counterbalance to Hezbollah's influence (Wehrey et al., 2009).

The split over Lebanon's domestic affairs and the Shia connection between Hezbollah and Iran has made the sectarian makeup of the country easier to manipulate. Supporting proxy powers in the Levant is a reflection of Iran's own insecurities, however. Iran lacks strong military capabilities in comparison to other Arab Gulf countries, and has remained isolated and insecure on many levels. To ease Iran's insecurity, Hezbollah and proxy powers are used as strategies to counter these effects. Attempting to limit Iran's involvement in Lebanon, Riyadh's Lebanon policy comes across as strictly sectarian through its support of Sunni related factions. Hezbollah has now become a crucial part of Iran's effective resistance alliance, but the growing influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon drives Saudi Arabia to create new opportunities to counter Iranian influence.

3.2.2 Hamas in Gaza

The origin of Hamas is recognized to appear during the first intifada in 1987, and is originally accepted as an offshoot of the Sunni affiliated Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas saw pragmatism in maintaining a relationship with Iran, although its leadership's current resistance strategy has caused much confusion to those proponents in the region that wish to persuade it towards a more sectarian driven alliance (Schanzer, 2013). Hamas receives financial and diplomatic support from Iran and by extension Syria, but is still considered a terrorist group by many. The Arab Spring has created moments of instability in Hamas and Iran's relationship, but its delicate position between the Riyadh and Tehran's rivalry has yet to drift Hamas from Iran's orbit.

The Palestinian issue is a key, if not the primary, Middle East concern, as the symbolism of Palestine in the region can never be untangled from the region's security. Moreover, the regional conflict with Israel remains one of the world's most tragic circumstances. Hamas has not been able to ignore Iran's significant support to the Palestinians in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iran's relationship with Hamas thus started as leverage over Israel and the US, and supporting Hamas gave Iran another role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Through Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran became a border state for Israel, and through its support for Palestinian groups, Iran was inside Israeli-occupied territory (Parsi, 2007). For Tehran, any weakness in the perception of its relationship with Israel and the Palestinians would seriously jeopardize Iran's most important strategic goal—that of rapprochement with the other Arab countries of the region (Parsi, 2007).

If circumstances in Lebanon easily divided Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry along sectarian lines, their involvement in the Palestinian territories is less clear. Iran's non-state allies gave Iran a resistant position in the region, and Tehran's support for Hamas, a Sunni Islamist organization, validated that regional dynamics are not necessarily aligned along ideological lines. There was much effort on the part of the international community, mainly the US, to isolate Hamas after it won majority seats in the parliament in 2006. The effort was unsuccessful as Hamas has remained popular in the region, and has continued to govern the Gaza Strip since 2007, but the strengthening of Hamas in the region after Palestinian elections in 2006 brought more confrontation to the forefront in the Palestinian territories between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia has aimed to counteract Iran's support for Hamas in the Gaza Strip, by supporting the continued Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. When the conflict

between Fatah and Hamas in the government split the Palestinian political factions and their governing territories over the formation of the parliament in 2006, Saudi Arabia later tried to broker a deal between them to reconcile their differences. A successful reconciliation might have been able to sway Hamas and other Palestinian divisions away from Iran's influence. Unfortunately, it was an unsuccessful attempt and Riyadh was seen as incapable once again of playing an influential role in Israeli-Palestinian affairs (Salloukh, 2013). Moreover, the failed negotiations demonstrated Riyadh's desperate attempt to move influence in the Levant away from Tehran's orbit, as a threat to their domestic and regional legitimacy.

The Middle East in general lacks a stable geopolitical order, and the recurring process of establishing a new and stable balance to the region brings to the surface and intensifies regional rivalries (Parsi, 2007). The Levant's proximity to Israel, and its weak political institutions, was a welcome playing field for meddling in relation to the region's geopolitics. Saudi Arabia's policies in the Levant were direct retaliations to its view of Iran's growing influence in regional affairs. The fractured nature of the Lebanese political system, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, gave Iran the opportunities it was seeking to play a leading role in the Middle East. The result of the ill-favored Saudi foreign policy over Iran's foreign policy has caused the regional disaster to continue to unfold.

3.3 Iraq 2003

Iraq was traditionally regarded as a powerful state throughout Middle East history. Iraq is the only country that borders both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and its proximity previously served as a stabilizer in Saudi-Iranian relations. A seismic

geopolitical shift in the Middle East occurred when the US invaded, and caused the late Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Baathist regime to collapse. The breakdown of Iraq's political, economic, and social institutions immediately created a security vacuum in the region. The new Iraqi void allowed Saudi Arabia and Iran to pursue their interests for political influence in the country. Still unfolding more than a decade later, the turmoil in Iraq has devastatingly created a passage for regional conflict.

After U.S. plans in Iraq took a different path than former U.S. President George W. Bush's administration had originally planned, Iran took advantage of the regional changes and strategically began extending its influence in Iraq and the broader Middle East (Matthiesen, 2013). The historical ties between Iran and Iraq's holy cities of Najaf and Karbala made Iranian presence in Iraq and the connection of Iran to the Shia population in the country easily defensible (Cole & Keddie, 1986). At first, Iran ended up playing a helpful role for the U.S. during the Iraq invasion, particularly in the reconstruction phase immediately following the Saddam's collapse. Among other things, Iran instructed its influential proxy groups in Iraq after the war to participate in reconstruction rather than resist the American occupation (Parsi, 2007).

Iran has a historical fear of outside interference, and the invasion of Iraq only made them fearful to their own possible destabilization or possible regime change. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's relationship with the U.S. further fueled suspicions in Iran of the increased American presence in the region. This caused Iran to create a delicate balancing act in Iraq, as Iran was fearful that they could become the next American target. There was much immediate speculation that Iran began backing armed factions in Iraq through the use of their Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp, Quds Force, to destabilize Iraq at the expense of the American military presence (Matthiesen, 2013).

Iran was successfully able to broker a deal between new Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his allies in 2006, making the first new Iraqi government seen as favorable toward Tehran. The elimination of Iran's old enemy Saddam Hussein and the establishment of what was viewed as a new Shia-dominated and Iran friendly government was an immediate gain for Iran's regional ambitions. Saudi Arabia tried to maintain its own influence in the new Iraqi government, but it was Iran that successfully networked to their advantage and reserved its power in the new government. This became a huge concern for Saudi Arabia, as Iraq served as a previous counterbalance to Iran, the gap left by a weak Iraq with a now Iranian friendly government only exacerbated Iranian-Saudi tensions.

When the US began withdrawing from Iraq, balancing Iranian influence reignited tensions and introduced new levels of sectarian violence in Iraq (Gause III, 2011). The resulting instability led Iran to criticize the Saudi regime as acting as an American proxy in the region, and as a source of undermining the new Iraqi government. For Riyadh, the U.S. presence in the region had been seen as a security guarantee for Saudi Arabia in a newly formed Iraqi government. There is a historical precedent for Saudi involvement in the conflicts of its neighbors (Mabon, 2013), however. In contrast, Saudi Arabia's increasing involvement in Iraq worried Iran, as Riyadh pushed the claim that the Iranians were looking to contain the Sunni influence in the region, as well as openly condemning Shia Muslims (Gause III, 2007). Saudi Arabia managed to develop a policy of damage control in Iraq by developing relationships with Sunni factions in the Iraqi political sphere. Riyadh hoped to avoid the consolidation of further Iranian influence by covertly promoting Sunni groups and providing financial support to Sunni politicians and Salafi groups, yet aiming to avoid circumstances for full-fledged conflict.

This policy was aimed at protecting Riyadh's influence in Iraqi affairs, and keeping a post-American Iraq distant from Iran. Saudi Arabia perceived its loss of power in Iraq inside the new government, and the extent of Iran's influence in Iraq, as also potentially posing domestic threats to the Saudi regime (Wehrey et al., 2009). For Riyadh, being undermined in Iraq and inside the kingdom was unacceptable, and it has since begun developing strengthening tactics for Riyadh's influence inside the country. Internal security and instability near Saudi Arabia's borders is not ideal for Riyadh, and the Saudi regime looked at the situation in Iraq and the regional balance of power, as Iran continuing to have the upper hand. As Riyadh became more proactive in Iraq after the US began to withdraw, sectarian violence began to grow intensely. The US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have come to understand that what continues to happen in Iraq will change the political and economic landscape of the region.

Although it has been said that Iran is the one pursuing an aggressive sectarian policy in the region, the contrast of Iranian and Saudi Arabian behavior since the fall of Saddam suggests just the opposite (Wehrey et al., 2009). Iran's strategic calculations are more or less based on a fear of the changing regional dynamics and regime security. Tehran's ambitions in Iraq served to facilitate Iran's positioning in the region, and its established connections in the new government grew out of concerns for maintaining influence in the government to guarantee an Iranian friendly neighboring state, as leverage over the U.S. However, creating Iran's new relationship with Iraq, caused reactionary instability in Riyadh's regional policy, and has helped to create a climate in Iraq for intense sectarian conflict. Whether the result of a sectarian conflict was intentional or not, a destabilized Iraq has turned it into a battleground that is a part of a continuing proxy battle between Riyadh and Tehran. This became important once again

in 2010, as Iran's open support for non-state actors in Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, and Iraq, pushed Iran's regional position into a new dimension.

3.4 The Arab 'Spring'

It all began in 2010, when a young Tunisian man named Mohammed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in Tunisia. His overwhelming frustrations with discrimination and corruption in Tunisian society, set off the biggest wave of change in the region since the US overthrew Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 (Haas & Lesch, 2013). Almost instantly, what had started out as national demonstrations caused a wave of uprisings overthrowing authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East. The first of its kind was in January 2011, when former Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali stepped down in what became known as the Jasmine Revolution. The demonstrations in Tunisia were in opposition to the malaises of Tunisian society, as the people demanded a more democratic and transparent ruling system of government.

Following dramatically in February 2011, after weeks of violent protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, hundreds of deaths, and millions of supporters worldwide, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stepped down from office and relinquished control of the state over to the Egyptian military. The deteriorating political, economic, and social conditions in Egypt had spread to every part of Egyptian society, bringing together a demand for real change. Mubarak's fall was indeed a turning point in the Arab Spring, which eliminated Egypt as Riyadh's official and strong Arab state ally. The significance of the revolution drove the direction of the region into uncertainty, and dealt Tehran an unprecedented favor, and led Riyadh to believe that their kingdom was at serious risk to be overthrown (Parsi & Marashi, 2011).

Following in the spring of 2011, protests in Libya led to a rebellion across the country. A country led by a dictatorship with a severe lack of human rights, led Libya to become the third country to experience the Arab Spring. Intense fighting between the Libyan opposition and the late Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi and his supporters, gradually developed into the Libyan Civil War. International intervention and the successful advancement from the opposition, eventually led to Gaddafi's death in 2011 and the end of his more than forty years in leadership. As the Arab uprisings continued on into Bahrain and Yemen, the uncertainty of 2011 reinforced Saudi Arabia's view that Iranian influence was a grave threat to its stability and regional position (Wehrey, 2014).

Demands for political reform that were spreading across the region consolidated fear in Saudi Arabia. Insulating the kingdom from threats to their regime instantly became a part of Riyadh's response strategy throughout the Arab uprisings. Despite their vast oil wealth and financial security, Riyadh became fearful that Arab uprisings general demands for political change would spread into its own kingdom. Saudi Arabia's domestic environment is made vulnerable to demands for change due to high unemployment, human rights violations, and ongoing repression of the kingdom's Shia population. Since 2011, Riyadh has continued serious efforts to crackdown on protesters, emboldened by the Arab Uprisings, in the oil rich Eastern province of Qatif and the home of most of the country's Shia population. Moreover, Riyadh's brutal intervention during the 2011 protests in Bahrain, clearly represented Saudi Arabia's counterrevolutionary motives to prevent regime changes among its allies, and prevent Bahrain from falling into Iran's influence (Gause III, 2011).

Early on, Iran championed the causes of the Arab uprisings, and viewed the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, as a welcomed change. Iran promoted the

origins of their own revolutionary ideals, claiming that the Arab uprisings would liberate the people of the region from further repression in authoritarian Arab states. Iran sympathized with the protestors in the region, particularly in Bahrain, and Tehran hoped that the movements would ignite further regime change in Bahrain, and continue to spread to the rest of the Arab-Gulf states. Riyadh's response to the protests in Bahrain resulted in increased sectarian sentiments in the region, as the attack was viewed as an attack on Shia Muslims. In reaction, Tehran used the incident as instrumental support for Iran's geopolitical maneuvering (Parsi & Marashi, 2011). Iran's domestic grievances, including imposed international sanctions as a result of their controversial nuclear program and the Iranian population's demands for political reforms, made Tehran aware of the need to use its regional positioning to consolidate its allies and promote the uprisings. Tehran ultimately hoped to form new alliances in the region after decades of Arab isolation in the Gulf to further its regional ambitions.

Emphasizing sectarian differences was not a useful strategy for Iran, however, as they have always attempted to appeal to the region as transcending the Sunni-Shia and Arab-Persian boundaries, as exemplified by its alliance with Syria. Further, structural complications among the Arab-Sunni monarchies and the differences between their own regional policies, made emphasizing sectarian differences useful as an instrumental tactic to create cohesion against Iran. As a result of an unorganized understanding of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia, the Arab monarchies, and Iran all proved unable to develop a coherent strategy to deal with the Arab uprisings. In March 2011, when the uprisings began to spread into Syria, Iran retracted its stance for regime change in the region, and Saudi Arabia and the GCC were given an opportunity to reverse the geopolitical changes that had been consolidating in the past decade.

3.5 Conclusion

The Arab Spring not only demonstrated the will to remove authoritarian leaders in the region, but also the region's permeability and the difficulties in creating regional and state security. The authoritarian state systems were constructed to maintain the status quo and to ensure state survival, but the continued demands to address the needs of local actors and populations made space for the influences and interferences from non-state and outside actors in the region (Brynen, Moore, Salloukh, & Zahar, 2012). The indistinct direction of where the region was heading presented both an opportunity and panic for Tehran and Riyadh. The Arab Spring did not guarantee changes in the regional balance of power, and it would have been naïve of both Riyadh and Tehran to consider themselves immune to the possibilities of uprisings in their respective states.

An extreme focus on state security is a function of living in an insecure and interference prone region. Saudi Arabia and Tehran each believed that they must assume the role of the regional power to address the vacuum left by a deteriorating regional status quo (Haas & Lesch, 2013). Political survival is based on responses to security, but Iran and Saudi Arabia's meddling in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and the Arab Uprisings, have only fueled regional instability and allowed sectarianism to become an inseparable part of the Middle East's geopolitical battles. Sectarianism is ultimately a by-product of Saudi Arabia and Iran's power inequities, and meddling in fractured states brought identity politics into conflicts in the region to explicate sectarian differences.

There is no question that sectarian identities are present in the region, but the threat perception of sectarianism is a mirror of regime insecurity (Gause III, 2007). Iraq

and the Levant region have provided a backdrop to how Saudi Arabia and Iran partake in meddling of sectarian politics as part of their regional strategies. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran's involvement in the region are based on generally pragmatic calculations, but most of the local actors that they support are inherently sectarian. The competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has previously been mainly on the Arab-Israeli front, and the current sectarian divides should not be overstated as a factor in the rivals' policy calculus toward one another, although it is a serious obstacle (Wehrey et al., 2009).

The demographic realities show that Iran has been more deliberative and successful in the region throughout the last decade, but Saudi Arabia's new activism is worth noting. Riyadh's suffered losses in the region to Tehran, and began to focus on a policy of damage control, but Riyadh has not been able to project power in the same way by supporting Salafi and tribal groups in the region. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's aspirations for Arab Gulf state unity in the region is farfetched, as the divisions between them show more independent policies than cohesion (Wehrey, 2014). Competition in the Gulf has increased tensions within the GCC, and disunity has complicated a successful monarchical bloc towards Iran. Mainly Qatar has played a significant role in this, and has used its positioning in the region to become more independent and proactive as a challenge to Saudi Arabia's leadership authority.

Overall, the region's alliances have arguably remained in Iran's orbit, and Tehran successfully projected Iranian influence in the region through their proxy affiliated relationships throughout the last decade. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran has pursued less of a non-sectarian strategy appealing to the Palestinian cause, and opposing Western imperialism and the US, by supporting several non-state actors in the region. Saudi Arabia ultimately viewed Iran's presence in Iraq, Hezbollah's growth and the

Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006, its commitment to Hamas, and its continuation of Iranian nuclear program, as Tehran's way of pushing Iran to seek a dominant role in the region (Gause III, 2007). What was to come in Syria was Riyadh's opportunity to distance Damascus from the Levant, so that Iran would be cut off from the region significantly.

Chapter Four

Syria

4.1 Introduction

What began as a mostly peaceful uprising, has transformed into a bloody civil war. The initial demands in 2011 for domestic reforms in Syria have engaged a regional response that has entangled the Syrian uprising into a turf for a regional proxy war. The UNHCR estimates 3 million people have fled their homes in result of the conflict, almost 6.5 million people are internally displaced, and death toll estimates are now approximately 190,000.⁷ The violence against civilians is unfathomable, as the Syrian civil war between the regime and its opponents has morphed into a new arena for the region's geopolitical battles.

Analysis of the region's geopolitical battles in Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, and throughout the Arab uprisings, are different from the conflict in Syria. The comparable literature of academic scholarship on the Syrian war is limited and hesitant, as it is a new event for academics to explore, as it continues to mutate, confusing academics, pundits, and scholars to rethink what is happening in the region. Writing about Syria in the present is a challenge, as the conflict is ongoing and the dynamics are shape shifting rapidly among other circumstances. In an effort provide a detailed analysis, this chapter intends to overcome this dilemma by exploring as much of the updated information as possible, while underscoring that the changes in Syria might eventually lead to new areas for exploration.

⁷ See *Syria conflict: UN says more than 3m have fled war*. *BBC News*. (2014, August). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28977117>

It was in the end realist motivations stirred Iran and Saudi Arabia's initial involvement in Syria, although the conflict has reached and reintroduced sectarian cleavages into the Middle East. Several of the conflict's dimensions have been overshadowed by the violent sectarian fighting that has consumed Syria, as it expands throughout region. Although pre-existing sectarian divisions are not unnatural to the Middle East, past events demonstrate more often that ideological divisions are revived as a result of structural and domestic factors. Beginning in 2012, the Sunni-Shia dimension of the conflict has mutated into a key factor of the Syrian Civil War, causing devastating consequences for the entire region.

This chapter aims to explore Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement inside Syria as of the beginning of the uprising in 2011, and emphasize their role in facilitating the violence and transformation of the uprising into civil war. The chapter begins with a setting of the Syrian conflict from its early stages as a domestic conflict, towards the eventual regionalization of the civil war. Saudi Arabia's assertiveness and using the opportunity for regime change in Syria, to rein in Iran's expanding regional role, has galvanized ideological elements into the conflict in combination with the GCC Sunni-monarchies by contributing to mostly Sunni opposition groups.

Saudi Arabia views regime change in Syria as crucial to weakening Iran's well established influence in the Levant. Riyadh views Syria as a final opportunity to shift the balance of power in its favor, by reorienting Syria's alliance with Iran, and limiting Hezbollah. On the other hand, Tehran's calculations are based on preserving the Assad regime, and guaranteeing that a post-war Syria lies in accordance with Iranian interests. Lastly, the chapter highlights that the regional involvement in the Syrian conflict is insufficiently explained by solely sectarian motivations, but this element has invited

Islamist and fundamentalist factions into the region and exacerbates the ongoing hostilities.

4.2 The Syrian Conflict

Syria is currently the location of the greatest proxy war, and the most prominent example of external meddling from Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region. Syria's geopolitical concerns led the Baathist regime to historically maintain tight security over the political makeup of the country, to prevent Syria from penetration from external interference (Seale, 1986). Syria is a historically and geographically strong state, and the Assad family's Baathist regime successfully managed to secure its position in the region through its alliances and proxy relationships for decades (Lesch, 2012). The roots of the uprisings which began in Syria during February 2011 are far from the current realities of the civil war. The response to the anti-regime protests in the region throughout the Arab Spring, spurred demands in the periphery for change against the growing inequalities and corruption inside Syria (Haas & Lesch, 2013). Much of the rural and agricultural population frustrations with the regime were a result of disparities, such as low income and a lack of basic needs, but were once the majority of the population that supported the Baath party in its commitment to benefitting the lower classes (Hinnebusch, 1991).

The deterioration of society led to demands for social, economic, and political changes. Combined with growing unemployment and lack of transparency in Syrian society, the discontentment began to spread nationwide. The domestic environment in Syria has previously been more cohesive along sectarian lines compared to neighboring states, like Lebanon and Iraq, although society was often politicized in order to keep authority over the state (Hinnebusch, 2012). This mixture of growing inequalities,

divisions, President Bashar Al-Assad's authoritarian state and its preceding reputation, along with the insecurities presented by the Arab uprisings, make it unlikely to suggest that violence in Derra would have taken a different course in March 2011.

The treatment of the youths involved in the protests in Deraa, were reportedly violent and cruel, as they were accused by security for writing graffiti of anti-regime propaganda. The initial reactions toward the protests from the regime consisted of using violence to install fear in the population, and played a crucial role in pushing the opposition movement from non-violent to violent demonstrations throughout the area (Hokayem, 2013). The incident fueled the spread of the protests into further rural cities and areas. Unlike the Sunni-Shia divisions that define the environment in Syria as of 2014, the early mobilization of the opposition was mostly based on divisions in the population's relationship to the regime, quality of life, and location within the state.

Following protests in Derra, the next cities to join the uprisings were Homs and Hama, where Hama a majority Sunni city, became famous in 1982 for a Muslim Brotherhood uprising against Bashar Al-Assad's father former President Hafez Al-Assad. It is worth mentioning that in response to the revolt, the late President's forces brutally suppressed the uprising resulting in a death toll estimated as high as 25,000 people.⁸ As a tactic in 2011, Bashar Al-Assad's regime attempted to preserve its support bases early on to prevent the spread of demonstration, assuring the Syrian population that the growing violence in the country was a result of terrorism and outside meddling. When the protests began to spread into the urban areas of the country, the population became increasingly divided. In the major cities, such as Aleppo and Damascus, the

⁸ See *Syria an Amnesty International Briefing*. (1983, November). <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE24/013/1983/en/137895f8-4444-4f77-b9ea-cb1c0a61b4be/mde240131983en.pdf>

growing uprisings were viewed as divisions between the lower to middle classes, and the upper classes loyal to the regime, although individual reactions varied.

For example, the Syrian Kurdish population contemplated carefully as to whether or not to get involved in the uprisings for not particularly class based concerns, but as not to compromise the minority group's position within the country (Berti & Paris, 2014). More importantly, the sectarian divisions were absent in many areas, and the divisions began to deepen only after discrepancies increased as a result of actors nurturing sectarian sentiments. President Assad himself played a role in mobilizing the minority groups, such as Druze, Alawi, Christian, and Kurdish communities, as a protective political strategy. Since the initial protests originated in mostly Sunni populated areas, the regime attempted to organize its support bases among other factions, to prevent further spread of the protests. Assad's motivation for regime security drove his ensuing military strategy against the opposition, assuming that the demonstrations could be quickly put to a halt.

The president's military mindset and authoritarian rule compromised the regime's position with the opposition from the beginning. However, the debate continues as to whether or not the initial protestors in Derra and the regime's violent responses and repression to the spread of the protests, actually caused the outbreak of the fighting (Hokayem, 2013). Assad assumed that the majority of Syrian population stood behind the regime and that stability of the Syrian state. While this may have initially been true, the continuing escalation of violence led those who were loyal to the regime to question their support for Assad and their long-term security in the country (Berti & Paris, 2014). Eventually, in June 2012, President Assad announced that Syria's growing unrest had officially transformed from an uprising into civil war. The metamorphosis of

the early protests into civil war, shockingly demonstrated the fragility of Syrian society, and the political strategy of the Assad's regime, which it had so carefully attempted to manage for decades.

By 2012, the rapid deterioration of the state and the conflict began to receive growing regional and international attention. The superficial reforms that President Bashar Al-Assad campaigned to impose proved unsuccessful in preventing the expansion of demonstrations. Many were skeptical of the large gap between policy reforms and actual implementation. Assad's regional allies, Iran and Hezbollah, slowly entered the conflict by standing behind Assad's claims for reform, as proof of the Assad's good intentions and the claims of external intervention from regional and international powers were actually causing Syria's downward spiral (Berti & Paris, 2014). In contrast, the never fully united opposition increasingly fragmented. From the early stages of the conflict, there was a lack of organization in the opposition's strategy. The growing divisions among opposition and forthcoming rebel groups lacked any collective solid plan against the regime.

The absence of a clear and credible opposition leadership in the early stages of the uprising has allowed foreign-based clerics and leaders to inject poisonous sectarian narratives into the geopolitical conflict (Hokayem, 2013). For Assad, these divisions from the outset worked in the regime's favor, and allowed him to maintain his position as Syrian President. As long as the Syrian military continues to stand behind the regime defending Assad, the priority of the remaining state institutions is maintaining regime security for its survival (Gause III, 2011). Sadly, the crumbling of Syrian society created yet another security vacuum in the region, and by extension, another opportunity for regional powers to meddle in neighboring states affairs. The entry of regional

powers into the Syrian conflict has created a deep fear in the region, and the sectarian divisions that were emphasized to manipulate and provoke, or prevent, the breakdown the state, has changed the setting for the battle over regime change in Syria.

4.3 Saudi Arabia

From the turn of the century until quite recently, Saudi Arabia has attempted to distance Syria away from its alliance with Iran. Riyadh's repeatedly failed attempts to isolate Syria from the Levant, specifically in Lebanon, only motivated Syria to strengthen its position in the region by consolidating its strategic alliance with Iran and Hezbollah (Samii, 2008). Syria's absence of any real power, due to its geographic location, minimal amount of resources, and religious and ethnic diversities, limited the state's abilities to influence the region on its own (Wakim, 2013). The ties that bind Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, essentially balanced the Sunni-monarchical alliance in the Gulf among Saudi Arabia and the GCC states.

At the outset of the Syrian uprising, Saudi Arabia and the GCC offered their support to Assad. They offered financial compensation for a form of regional protection, as they had done similarly throughout the Arab uprisings, to attempt to sway Syria away from Iranian influence and activism in the conflict (Berti & Paris, 2014). Saudi Arabia and Gulf officials also avoided publicly advocating for the removal of President Assad. They were hesitant, as the monarchies were already fearful of the rapid changes in the region brought about by the Arab uprisings, and did not want to provoke further risks to their domestic security. However, Assad refused to concede to the demands, emphasizing that the uprisings were of an existential nature, particularly an Islamist conspiracy, aimed at undermining the regime (Adami & Poursesmaeili, 2013).

Riyadh was then the first to recall its ambassador from Damascus, as a response for its support of the opposition movement in Syria. By 2012, Riyadh's position officially changed, and regime change in Syria was thought of as a perfect opportunity to reclaim its influence in the Levant. Saudi Arabia seeks a Sunni authoritarian regime in Damascus that will align with the Gulf monarchies, and break Syria from the resistance axis (Wehrey, 2014). Moreover, based on its religious legitimacy in the Middle East and its oil wealth, Riyadh considers itself as the only Arab state with the potential to fulfill a regional power vacuum left by a post-Assad Syria (Ayoob, 2013). Viewing the prospects of the vulnerabilities from a weakened Syria, particularly the sectarian makeup of a state where a Sunni majority was governed by an Alawite minority, made Riyadh's possibility for regime change highly promising.

Regime change in Syria became the geopolitical necessity for the Riyadh, as this was seen as the ultimate opportunity to deter Syria away from Iran, weaken Hezbollah, and makeup for the loss of influence in Iraq (Salloukh, 2013). Riyadh's control over a post-Assad Syria would be a compensation for the last decade; it views a post-Assad Syria as crucial to containing Iran, and its proximity to Israel and the Palestinian Territories (Salloukh, 2013). Saudi Arabia even chose as to extend an invitation to Jordan to join the GCC, to bolster its own support for the kingdom, so that Saudi Arabia could use Jordan for access into Syria (Wakim, 2013). However, the reality of the successful outcome based off of Riyadh's strategies has been grim.

Iran's involvement, Hezbollah's entry into the conflict, and Iran's attempt to establish its presence in Syria at the expense of Hezbollah, is a significant threat to Riyadh's positioning in the region. Iran's strategic alliance with Syria, would ultimately establish an official Iranian win for the region in Damascus. To counter the possibility,

Riyadh's solution for weakening Assad's authority in the Levant would help Saudi Arabia to reclaim influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and possibly re-create a new Gulf-monarchical friendly leadership in Syria (Hokayem, 2013). Although Saudi Arabia pushes revolution in Syria as liberating the Syrian population, the Gulf does not have the capability or the experience with establishing democratic governments, as they are simply in Syria for their own personal vested interests (Qaddor, 2013).

Grave mistakes were made in Riyadh's calculations, however, as it overlooked the security risks of provoking the sectarian factor of the conflict. A strategy that required careful cooperation was replaced with inconsistent policies among Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, which weakened the strategy of the opposition and increased the violence among insurgent groups (Hokayem, 2013). Attempting to avoid any direct confrontation and meddling in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and GCC states such as Qatar and Kuwait, financed and supplied Islamist groups inside Syria. Riyadh specifically chose to provide support for the SNC, the FSA, and to its loyal Salafi groups. Saudi Arabia had an overriding interest to back any opposition group, with the exception of Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, to end Assad's presidency (Berti & Paris, 2014). Supporting different groups, as there was no majority in the opposition, became a useless strategy. This strategy only aggravated the opposition groups throughout 2012 and 2013, and as the conflict escalated, frustrated opposition groups demanded individual representation.

The geopolitical contests that have allowed the sectarian divisions to ferment themselves in Syria society have resulted in more than a dozen Syrian opposition groups (International Crisis Group, 2012). Ultimately, Saudi Arabia supports any an opposition that would establish a Sunni authoritarian regime in Syria and would create a friendly

relationship with the kingdom (Ayoob, 2013). A divided opposition has been the biggest obstacle to a reaching a resolution with the regime, but it has also created disagreement in the Gulf among Saudi Arabia and the GCC monarchies. Since 2011, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, have been the main financiers and support of the Syrian opposition. However, their independent policies for supporting opposition groups have created a tri-partite division in the conflict.

Kuwait has given a new dimension to the Islamist groups in the conflict by funding of radical Salafist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (Wehrey, 2014). Qatar's involvement has furthered devastated the environment for the opposition in Syria. Their support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the region facilitated the divisions, and Qatar became the main supporter for the SNC. Doha's actions against Saudi Arabia were meant to challenge Riyadh's assertiveness and establish its own independent regional policies, without traditional guidelines from Saudi Arabia. This odd mixture for ending Iran and Syria's alliance, by financing varying factions of the opposition, and the discrepancies among Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, shaped an uncontrollable fundamentalist environment in the conflict that has only led to further bloodshed and devastating consequences (Wehrey, 2014).

Syria accused Saudi Arabia of igniting more than a sectarian conflict in the country, as Riyadh invited a regional proxy war into their territory at the expense of the region for a victory over Iran. A near resolution to the conflict is farfetched, as different foreign stakeholders have different political goals. Syria's diversity allowed for the regional meddling to exploit the society, but wrong strategies have only increased conflict and divisions among the opposition. The Sunni-monarchies underestimated the complexity of the domestic environment, and have ironically contributed to

strengthening Assad staying in his position of leadership. By 2014, stirring the conflict's sectarian sentiments created more the domestic divisions and regional instability, and it proved to frighteningly facilitate the rise of jihadist and Islamists groups (Gause III, 2014).

4.4 Iran

Iran's position in the conflict is not concerned with a competitive sectarian resistance, but with whether or not replacing President Assad is in line with Iranian interests, as regime change in Syria presently poses the greatest threat to Tehran's security (Salloukh, 2013). Iran announcing support for Assad was contradictory to its previous positioning on the uprisings throughout the Arab Spring (Parsi & Marashi, 2011). Tehran eventually understood that its involvement in Syria was crucial, as the conflict was growing and the possibility of Assad becoming the next victim of regime change, would consequently effect Iran's position in the region, particularly regarding its relationship with Hezbollah, and ipso facto, Israel and the United States.

The alliance that connects Tehran and Damascus, has allowed Iran to break from feelings of Arab-isolation it has experienced since the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979. As a result of Iran's self-perceived isolation in the region, it attempted to transcend the Arab-Muslim world by appealing to the broader region originally through a non-sectarian strategy. As mentioned in the last chapter, Iran's alliance with Syria, allows Tehran access to the Mediterranean, capabilities to manage its relationship with Hezbollah, and most importantly, maneuvering in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Likewise, Syria benefits from the alliance through its Lebanese border, by directly influencing Lebanese's affair through its ties to Hezbollah. If Iran and Syria's access to Lebanon,

Israel, and Palestinian Territories is limited, the entire political direction of the Levant is drastically altered.

Iran originally supported President Assad's claim that the conflict was not stirred by domestic dissatisfaction, but was instead a result of a conspiracy by Western countries and their respective allies, in favor of weakening Syria for specifically Israel's benefit (Parsi & Marashi, 2011). Tehran is fearful that regime change in Syria, could realign Syria away from Iran, completely cut off Hezbollah's resources, and pose a domestic threat to the Islamic Republic by even possibly inviting potential regime change into Iran (Milani, 2013). Moreover, Iran and the resistance axis cannot be viewed as collapsing under pressure, as the relationship between them represents resistance towards the US and Israel in the region (Parsi, 2007). The costs of Iran and Syria's alliance are now intertwined for their political survival in the region.

Iran's regional ambitions eventually brought Hezbollah's military entrance into the conflict. Iran needed to consolidate the remnants of the resistance alliance, to guarantee the survival of its vital deterrent, and prevent the Gulf monarchies from influencing any emergence of a Syrian regime unaligned with Iranian interests. As a result, Tehran has developed a strategy that ensures support from Hezbollah to protect Assad's regime unconditionally, and coordinates with Russia, their greatest international ally, to support Assad's regime (Wehrey, 2014). Iran's interest in maintaining its ascending influence in the Middle East coincides with aims for acknowledgement from the West as a key regional player. Iran's position in a post-war Syria can affect Iran's nuclear negotiations with the U.S. and the international community, including Turkey as an emerging regional contender (Parsi & Marashi, 2011).

As a result, Iran's opportunity in Syria to defend the resistance alliance, based on Tehran's calculations, strengthens Iran's position to establish itself internationally along with its strongest ally Hezbollah. It was Hezbollah's entry into the conflict as Tehran's supporter that solidified Iran as taking a sectarian side in the Syrian civil war, and fueled the existing sectarian divisions in Syria. Since Hezbollah represents Iran's greatest foreign policy achievement, its influence in Lebanon and the Levant is crucial to maintaining Iranian geopolitical interests in the region. Yet, the overall favorable regional opinion of Hezbollah, that had reached an all-time high when the organization's claimed victory over Israel in the summer war of 2006, quickly diminished with its entry into Syria.

Hezbollah's reputation as a Lebanese political but non-state actor was also compromised when it joined the fighting in Syria. Their involvement recognized Hezbollah as a proxy power of Iran that was fighting in Syria to defend Alawite and Shia solidarity (Milani, 2013). Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah currently provide combat force and training, intelligence services, and material support to Assad's regime (Hokayem, 2013). It is also notable to mention that Iran and Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, caused a split with Hamas, a former ally, and left the remaining Iran-Syria-Hezbollah relationship with blatant sectarian overtones (Salloukh, 2013). As mentioned in the last chapter, Tehran's previous relationship with Hamas, demonstrated that Iran's national interests often preceded ideological priorities in its alignment strategies (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002).

It is what will remain of Hezbollah, not Syria, which causes huge concern for Tehran (Milani, 2013). For Iran, losing a Hezbollah-friendly Syria in the region is not an option, and Iran is unconvinced of backing down from the regional conflict that its Revolutionary Guards and regime regard as crucial to its regional standing. If a part of

the link in the resistance axis crumbles, the likelihood of the remaining alliance as a U.S.-Israeli deterrent will be drastically weakened. On the other hand, a victorious outcome for Assad will mean that Iran will maintain and facilitate its position as a regional power player. Iran and Hezbollah are both empowered in Syria, as Assad welcomes support from both actors, along with Russia, as the only links for Assad to avoid Western pressures from stepping down as president. Further, Hezbollah's Syrian establishment now remains in Syria; and Iran's role in maintaining Assad's regime, to facilitate Assad's goal, is equally responsible for destroying the country.

4.5 Conclusion

As of early 2014, a geopolitical struggle provides the best explanation for the involvement of external powers in the Syrian conflict, as using a bi-polar sectarian framework for an explanation has its limitations (Berti & Paris, 2014). Ideological variables as a construct grew with the Syrian war although it was originally rooted as a domestic political struggle, and became a regional conflict because of the sectarian cleavages present at the initial states of the uprising. Due to the overwhelming Sunni majority in Syria, ruled by a deemed secular yet Alawite dominated regime, various Sunni political and Islamic factions have formed the vast majority of the opposition movement. As this chapter aimed to demonstrate, the incongruent policies between Saudi Arabia and Iran are determined more by geopolitical interests than by sectarianism, but the sectarian conflicts defining the Middle East's geopolitical battles provide unexpected and devastating repercussions.

The difficulties that have come with transforming Syria into the most recent site for the Saudi-Iranian contest in the region, has created a war with several parallels and

with high costs. The Syrian conflict is now a conflict among many communities local, regional, and international, with all the various factors involved. The geopolitical divisions between Riyadh and Tehran, and their respective allies, have caused tensions in the region's balance of power. Moreover, their external interests have created a sectarian environment that is growing radically and increasingly difficult to control. The rise of the Islamist groups in the conflict, collide with all parties interests in the conflict.

The humanitarian issue is the biggest human catastrophe created as a result of the conflict. Communities in the region are now a composition of Iraqi, Palestinian, and Syrian refugees, and the displacement of these populations has further fueled an opportunity to involve themselves in fundamentalist and jihadist groups. Islamist and jihadist groups operating in Syria did not exist at the beginning of the uprisings. Assad initially advocated that the conflict was based on conspiracy, and arguably created a gateway that allowed for it to eventually become a reality. Saudi Arabia is fully aware of the risks posed to their domestic security with the possibility of foreign fighters in Syria originating from the Gulf, posing a domestic threat if they return to their host countries (Associated Press, 2014). The growing fear of jihadists, have created an ultimate fear of insecurity for Saudi Arabia, and for the rest of the region. Sunni jihadist groups, terrorists groups Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah are now fighting each other. As the chaos continues, foreign fighters will continue to grow as key actors in the region.

The regional dynamics, which contain no single great power, facilitated the desperate geopolitical battle in Syria's now failing state. For Saudi Arabia, acknowledging that Iran is a major player in the Middle East is its ultimate loss. Saudi Arabia has used Syria to reassert its primacy within the GCC, attempting to construct a Saudi Arabia led regional order. Saudi Arabia's fear of Assad remaining in power is a

fear that Iran's influence in the Levant and Iraq will cement its dominance in the Persian Gulf. Further, the Gulf monarchies varying roles in supporting the opposition, has led to a rise in terrorist groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS⁹, al-Qaeda factions, and the blowback effects to regime security in the Gulf and the Levant has sparked serious concerns. Cooperation against rising jihadists in the region proves difficult as long as the major opposition supporters Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, remain fragmented and unable to construct a collective strategy.

As of 2014, Iran continues to unconditionally support Assad's regime. Iran's part in stirring sectarian sentiments created no real change, but has instead fueled competing factions and funneled money and arms in the conflict. It is yet to be determined however, if Hezbollah's and Iran's reputation within the region will entirely suffer. The security concerns for Iran continue to surpass the rising concerns of sectarianism. Their intervention in the war to maintain Assad's regime survival, at the expense of the Syrian people and for its own security in the region, is for the sake ensuring the enduring strength of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance. Continued Iranian involvement pushes a more assertive Sunni-monarchical policy to combat what the Gulf has termed a 'Shia Crescent' (Ma'oz, 2007). Overall, both Riyadh and Tehran's actions demonstrate the realist motivations that dominate the Persian Gulf's security priorities (Gause III, 2009).

The conflict in Syria as of 2014 is an extension of Saudi Arabia's and Iran's regional Cold War, even with the growing sectarian divide that has been brought about by the rise of the Islamists (Ryan, 2012). Syria has now become the greatest event in the region's history for geopolitical battles and its growing ideological underpinnings.

⁹ As of late 2014, ISIS or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, is also known as the Islamic State (IS) and sometimes referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant (ISIL).

Assad's secular image and decades of consolidating Syria as an authoritarian state, to ward off ideological interference, proved to fail. The overwhelming Sunni majority in Syria was an opening for Sunni political and Islamic factions to shape the layout of the conflict, but the sectarian undertones of the war began to spread only after the fighting intensified to attract foreign funding for rebel and opposition groups.

Bashar al-Assad's regime is engaged in desperate fight for its survival, and is unlikely to change its position on its own accord. Civil society in Syria continues to disintegrate, and the armed groups emerging are a result of the lack of government being able to protect the needs of the people. Assad asserts that the regime is fighting for Syrian sovereignty, against the fundamentalist and jihadist groups. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran, and their respective sides, have the same goal of obtaining victory in Syria to be considered the primary regional power. Further deterioration of the Syrian conflict makes it imperative to understand the geopolitical and regime security priorities that define the strategies of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, as they will remain the key regional players to influence an outcome in Syria.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1 Findings

Middle East politics has shown that naturally regional states will work to balance against stronger states in the region (Walt, 1987). This thesis has argued realist motivations serve as the best explanation for the dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This thesis has also hoped to demonstrate that in a post Arab-Spring context, the balance of power contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran is based on a battle over geopolitical positioning and regime survival. Exploring the changing regional landscape after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 up until the Syrian civil war, has demonstrated that balance of power and the region's insecurities continue to motivate alliances with local actors in the Middle East.

Riyadh and Tehran's ability to establish relationships with local actors in the region is ultimately an extension of their domestic and geopolitical interests. Sectarianism is not the fundamental driver of the region's relationships, as it cannot provide the best behavioral explanation for regional behavior. Sectarian and ideological narratives are present in the region, but have been injected into the geopolitical landscape, intensified conflict, and highlighted differences to isolate local competition. Before the Syrian civil war, Lebanon, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Arab uprisings further demonstrated the importance of institutions in the region, and how geopolitical confrontations have the capabilities to dramatically alter landscapes. The

results have resurged Iraq¹⁰ into new levels of conflict, and has amounted to the biggest proxy war of the century in Syria.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, ideologically and geopolitically, is more apparent during times of regional conflict (Tyler & Boone, 2012). Investigating many cases in the region, this thesis explained that the Syrian civil war was incorrectly made over by sectarian explanations, and argued instead realist dynamics motivated Iran and Saudi Arabia's involvement. Riyadh and Tehran are participating in a balance of power game through exploiting weak states and sectarian identities, to protect their relative positions, secure their respective systems of government, and advance their authority in the broader international context. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other actors involvement in Syria, is to maintain respective allies and secure preeminent positions in the region, but they do so at the violent cost. The result is the Syrian war now encompasses ethnic, sectarian, Islamist, Arab-Israeli, and monarchial divisions, on domestic, regional, and international levels.

5.2 Contributions and Concerns

In four years, Syria has created devastating issues for long term security in the region. A regional conflict of this magnitude cannot be overlooked. It has become a by-product of rivalries internationally between Russia and the US, and regionally among Saudi Arabia and the GCC, and Iran (Lassen, 2013). It is also the current most important example of the result of facilitating sectarianism as a security priority, as it has produced unimaginable effects. The stakes in Syria are viewed as too high for opposing Middle Eastern players, yet heavy involvement in Syria has only created more radical concerns.

¹⁰ See: <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/index.html>

Saudi Arabia and Iran's relationship in the region will be a deal breaker to a solution in the conflict.

The struggle over Syria has made the direction of the region difficult to assess, and sectarianism in the region's geo-political battles have destroyed societies, institutions and security on every level (Salloukh, 2014). If the jihadist and fundamentalist elements in Syria and Iraq continue spreading in the region, the remaining society and institutions in Syria are at high risk. The domestic divisions among Saudi Arabia and the role of Qatar, and their divisions in regard to supporting different jihadist groups has led to further fragmentation. Deepening political divisions in the region guarantee greater opportunities for sectarian conflict. Therefore, it is important to handle the growing regional rivalry appropriately, and find solutions to power struggles driving Syria into further violence.

Tremendous uncertainty surrounds the future of the Middle East. Syria is prized with the opportunity to change the alignment in the region, as whoever holds the future power in Syria will determine the course of transition. The roles of non-state actors within the region were introduced as a means for enhancing the interests of the state, but they have proved to be self-defeating, ineffective, and have created more violence. The regional rivalries in the Gulf, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and increasingly between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, will continue to be a vital concern. The severity of the conflict in Syria and the post-Arab uprisings power struggles should not be taken lightly.

With a cease-fire nowhere in sight, the consequences of border spillover from violence and refugees, high death tolls, psychological impacts, and the economic disasters, seem not enough to bring a solution to the war. Refugees are now constructed as a separate population in neighboring states, and suicide bombers and porous borders,

compromise the security of the Middle East. As the Syrian war continues, the region has had to absorb the repercussions, particularly the humanitarian crisis. If the conflict continues to accelerate, with or without Assad, the future for Syria is grim. The fundamentalist movements will be the biggest blockade to achieving better security in Syria and a better future for the region. The insecurities of Syria will be inherited along with a deeply rooted presence of Islamists as new actors in the region. The Islamic state's presence does exist within the conflict, and any solution would leave fundamentalist groups with a need to reintegrate into society. ISIS, IS, or ISIL, will be the biggest challenge to post-war Syria (Salloukh, 2014). Although Syria is at the time of this writing, the highlight of concern, other weak states in the region such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, are also prone to serious instability (Gause III, 2014).

5.3 The United States

The US lack of involvement in the early stages of the conflict left an opening for regional powers to intervene. The engagements of external actors have since largely contributed to the conflict. For the US, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry will be a key factor for any solutions to a post-war Syria, although its main Arab ally in the region, Saudi Arabia, is not interested in Iran participating in negotiations. This will have to be resolved as Iran's involvement in Syria must be acknowledged before any sort of resolution is feasible. This is important for U.S. and the international community to consider when the next round of negotiations for the conflict occur, to avoid further failed diplomatic talks similar to Geneva I and Geneva II.¹¹ The U.S. is currently the

¹¹ See *Looking Toward Geneva II on Syria*. Council on Foreign Relations. (2014, January). <http://www.cfr.org/syria/looking-toward-geneva-ii-syria/p32224>

ultimate balancer in the region, and U.S.-Saudi Arabia-Iran dialogue is crucial for formulating a strategy for the future.

The US failures to act constructively in the region, has also contributed to the breeding ground for jihadists (Harling, 2014). Moreover, the US engaging in counterterrorism is ineffective if jihadists groups continue to grow in the region. The U.S. should understand that without a strong Syrian institution to combat this, it will be a catastrophe for post-war transitional Syria. The U.S. must encourage Iran and Saudi Arabia to work together to combat the fundamentalist movement. This could be a key issue to encourage rapprochement between the two rivals to overcome a greater threat. Working together on the fundamentalist elements in the conflict will engage different actors, increase knowledge, awareness, and in return can help facilitate a solution.

The US must carefully decide how to proceed in the region immediately. It seems that as of late 2014, the Obama administration has decided to combat ISIS with air attacks, and a coalition of American troops to work with the new Iraqi government and the 'moderate' Syrian opposition (Cockburn, 2014). The Obama administration continues to put emphasis on cooperating with its allies in the region to combat the growing threats, but this strategy is unlikely to succeed if the US and the Gulf States do not engage in dialogue with Iran (Khatib, 2014). Furthermore, without future peace negotiations to end the civil war between Assad and the opposition, it is almost guaranteed that the fundamentalist issue will continue to be a serious dilemma (Cockburn, 2014). Iran and Saudi Arabia must be able to compromise on how to pursue their interests in the Middle East for any successful solution in the future (Khatib, 2014). Success of protecting US interests in the region will depend on the ability of their potential compromise.

The most immediate task is to make sure that ISIS is defeated on the battlefield (Gause III, 2014, p.26). A multilateral approach engaging the entire region is the best attempt to stop the spread of fundamentalism in the region. The risks associated with military engagement make it unconvincing as an option, although the ISIS provides the Obama administration with the appropriate measures to engage in military action in the region if deemed necessary (Harling, 2014). Relying on the regional balance of power to balance out on its own, is another possibility for protecting US interests in the Middle East, and also allows it to abstain from any further direct intervention.(Gause III, 2014). On the other hand, the US cannot remain unconcerned about growing repression and violence based sectarian fearfulness (Tyler & Boone, 2012). Overall, some sort of action is necessary to prevent Islamist groups from destroying the region, and cooperation among all parties in the region will influence the balancing process against ISIS, which has current no regional allies.

For the US, enduring criticisms with regard to its behavior in the Middle East never cease, but the US must secure its own interests for its own security. The US should be prepared for new relations with a post-Assad government, and its possible position in the region towards Israel (Tyler & Boone, 2012). Washington should engage with Iran, and with Saudi Arabia, as it is the best opportunity to prevent further deterioration in Syria. When doing so, it must also respect their differences, and their influences reflected in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and the Palestinian territories to avoid further deterioration in the region. Iran has established itself as an important power in the region, and Washington must engage with Tehran, if the Obama administration wants to protect itself and its allies from the growing Islamist fundamentalist threat (Gause III, 2014).

5.4 Russia

It is worth noting Russia's determining role in the development of the Syrian conflict. Not overlooking the direct economic ties Moscow has with Iran, Syria, and the region, Russia felt that the Arab uprisings posed an indirect threat to their domestic and national security, in relation to the countries in their near periphery, and that the popular movements could potentially spread outside the Middle East (Lassen, 2013). The geographical proximity of the Middle East creates a fear that disturbances in the region could cause direct consequences for Moscow. Russia believes that mishandling the conflict in Syria could compromise its interests in the region, including preventing instability in the Northern Caucasus and Central Asian regions. As a result, Russia's response to threats in the region require alliance building to develop and promote policies, and the Syrian conflict has created a new opportunity for Moscow to further consolidate its influence in the Middle East.

Moscow's alliance with Iran and Syria protects advancing Russian influence in the Middle East, reinforces its role as an offset to US interests in the region, and aims to prevent the spread of Islamist fundamentalist activity near its borders. Putin's perception is the pro-Western alliance in the region and in Syria is responsible for supporting the growth of fundamentalist activities. Russia specifically considers Saudi Arabia's Wahabi policies responsible for encouraging the activities of Chechen rebels near its borders (Freedman, 2003). Therefore, Russia's position on international intervention in the Syria represents its broader struggle with the US, Saudi Arabia, and other states in the region. Specifically Russia, along with China, has emphasized

opposition towards intervention in Syria by vetoing several crucial UNSC resolutions on Syria over the last few years.¹²

As Syria's largest arms provider, Russia has been arguably responsible for preventing further action against the Assad regime. Russian President Vladimir Putin has assertively reinforced his position in Syria, and is determined to show Moscow's position against external intervention in the matters of sovereign states to prevent any further turmoil that could compromise Russian national security. Moscow's direct opposition to the US stance on Syria further ultimately consolidates its standing as a counterbalance to the US and its regional allies. Seeking to expand its influence, Moscow will continue to pursue policies that favor Russian national interests in order to ensure its stability, and will channel interests through its pragmatic policy when it comes to Syria. In the struggle to define the changing Middle East, it's quite clear that Russia is not looking for regime change in Syria, asserting that a disoriented, destroyed, and further fragmented Syria is not a benefit to the interests of anyone.

5.5 Final Thoughts

The Middle East is a region that is unfortunately accustomed to conflict. As this thesis argued, the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran is being played out in their contest for influence, but using sectarianism as an explanation for conflict in the region, oversimplifies the diversity of the Middle East. Improving Saudi Arabia and Iran's relationship while this region endures continuing conflict could be the best option for halting the spread of violence associated with sectarianism in the region.

¹² Russia vetoed UNSC resolutions on Syria on October 4, 2011, February 4, 2012, July 19, 2012, and May 22, 2014.

Unfortunately, the Syrian conflict heading into its fourth year has passed opportunities for one-track solutions. The increasing resentment and rivalry for regional influence from Iran and Saudi Arabia, and now Turkey, leaves the immediate future with a pessimistic outlook for cooperation.¹³ Despite claims of good intentions, the regional rivalry is at present trapped in their ideological and interest-based struggles to be able or willing to commit to a resolution (Idiz, 2014).

There is a lack of understanding of complications in the Syrian conflict, and what is happening on the ground, but the domestic, regional, and international dimensions are all interconnected. As abovementioned, the directions of the region will heavily rely on the success of appeasing the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the outcome in Syria. At present, the remaining divisions in the region will continue to exacerbate sectarian barriers and compromise interests in any transitional Syria. The expansion of the ISIS will be a huge threat to all parties' interests, and preventing Syria from becoming a failed state will be a key and ultimate challenge.

¹³ See an example on Turkey's emerging role in the region and in Syria here: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/turkey-iran-saudi-arabia-odds-region.html#>

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